

Erin Lafond – Writing a Novel: Research and Execution

*The What*

The conclusion of this year's work is roughly the first five chapters of my novel *The Sisters of the Soljurn* along with several excerpts from future chapters and a complete chapter breakdown. *Sisters of Soljurn* is a fantasy novel targeted towards young adults. It centers around an ancient culture of women who worship an ultimate deity/goddess named Onya. These Sisters are chosen by Onya to uphold her rules, morals, and justice. The Sisters exist in a separate dimension created for them where they function independently of Earth with their own farms, infirmaries, and housing. In order to uphold the values of Onya, the Sisters sacrifice a bit of their humanity. In return, they obtain supernatural powers such as the ability to heal and catch bullets. They also have a man who functions as their soul mate, their *verc*, who ties them to humanity and keeps them grounded. Second to Onya is Enya, Onya's half-sister, who is the leader of the Sisters. Enya reincarnates every time she dies along with her *verc*, Organa. In this way, she is able to keep order and give leadership to the Sisterhood at all times.

In this novel, the protagonist is a human-born Sister named Mei. When she turns five, she is taken to the temple for training and there she meets Kali, a powerful Sister born inside the temple. As their training nears completion, the Sisterhood is targeted by a society of priests who have been worshiping evil forces. This society, viewing the Sisters as heretics, have decided to destroy the temple and its inhabitants. They begin to wage a war with the Sisterhood, using a diplomacy mission to blitz attack them. At this point, it is revealed that Mei is actually Enya incarnate. She is then imbued with her past memories and powers and uses her skills to save the Sisterhood from destruction. The Sisters manage to drive the Priests out and seal their dimension from other attacks, but then they are betrayed by a fellow Sister driven by ego named

Carmabella. Carmabella leads the priests in another attack against the temple and Enya, along with Kali and Organa, must defend her home.

### *The How*

When I first started this project, I think I had this delusional idea that this would be relatively easy. Time-intensive, but easy. I assumed most of my research would be content based (warfare, sai fighting, etc.), and, while I did much of this, most of my time was actually spent researching writing. I read books like *The First Five Pages* and *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. I had to learn how to address the flaws in my writing so I could move forward by myself. Basically, this project dashed every perception of novel writing I had.

I thought I understood the issues with my writing when I started. I had a major problem with setting. My characters were often floating in space with nothing to ground them. I had a tendency to rely on dialogue; description took a backseat. I had a sort of vague notion that I relied on adjectives and adverbs too much, but I did not understand why this was a problem. Plot-wise, my character motivations were shaky at best, and their conversations tended to be more day-to-day based rather than plot based (though I strongly denied this.) However, I had no idea about my biggest problem: flow.

It took me time to understand that sentences must flow together as seamlessly as possible. Things had to merge together, not for quick reading, but for undisturbed reading. When I went through my first draft, I had to combine a considerable amount of my sentences and found that I had a tendency to neglect dependent clauses. My edited drafts were full of my advisor's handwriting, scolding me for overusing subject-verb-object sentences. Moreover, I would often rely on my adverbs and adjectives to get my point across, causing me to be lazy with my verbs and nouns.

This understanding became useful as I was editing my work. I had handed it out to several professors and readers in order to gain feedback. As I was going through my advisor's edits of my work, I started to understand what he meant by the lack of flow in my writing. He slaughtered many of my sentences, and, in doing so, made them so much better. My sentences lacked connectivity and efficiency. They relied too much on "he did this" and "she did that," and, as a result, became monotone. Nothing is more boring than monotone. I had to see the issues with my sentences before I could understand how they could be improved.

### *The Why*

I realized about halfway through my project how utterly starved I was for representation in literature. I wanted to read about women, and I wanted those women to be real. I was sick of women being purely love interests, damsels in distress, and/or perfect superheroes. I am sick of women being side characters in men's stories. I am sick of reading about men, especially when it is the same story over and over. Yes, there are exceptions. Katniss, from *The Hungers Games*, is a great example of the direction stories should be going. Katniss is strong and capable and she decisively runs her own story. Even more remarkable, she picks the Beta male (Peeta) over the Alpha male (Gale) which further emphasizes how she is allowed to be powerful. The reader is even allowed to watch her struggle with PTSD, a rarity in female characters. Yet, even Katniss is pushed into a love triangle (a dramatically overused tactic) and falls into a more domestic, motherly role at the end. *Harry Potter* has a plethora of strong women who are powerful and intelligent, but even they settle into relatively domestic lives in the end, after being romantically paired with a man. There's nothing wrong with domestic life or marriage, but women in literature, more often than not, are put in a domestic lives no matter how intelligent and driven

they are. Basically, we are going in the right direction, but we still have a long way to go, especially considering that for every story there is about a woman, there are fifty about a man.

Despite the fact that I planned on having a plethora of strong women in my story, it was still an accident when I ended up with a novel where I apparently only name three men. There are only three men within the entire story that have any sort of relevance. There are a ton of men beyond this, but they remained grouped and/or in the background. The rest of my characters are women and they are all warriors. Beyond my main protagonist, there are almost thirty named women in this novel. They are an attempt to show the complexity of women and to show that a woman does not need to be romantically involved with a man, or romantically involved with anyone, to be compelling or interesting. My Sisters are women generally focused entirely upon their mission. They want to be the best warriors they possibly can and support their temple and their Sisterhood. Vercs (the men) are a crucial and necessary part of their lives, but they do not define the Sisters. I wanted to create characters that were defined by themselves, rather than by men.

### *The Result*

Below is an excerpt from the very beginning of my novel.

### *Prologue*

She looked like a normal little girl. On the outside, there was nothing distinguishing her from any other child on the playground, but Hecate knew better. It was a dark, wet day so the place was almost deserted. She watched closely from her hidden spot in the trees while the child played in the sandbox, similar to the way the child's mother watched her from a nearby bench.

The child had olive skin with thick, wavy brown hair and though she could not see them at this moment, Hecate knew her eyes to be hazel and almond shaped.

“Mei!” the mother, nearly identical to Mei in appearance, called, standing up. “It’s starting to rain! Let’s go home.”

Mei looked up at her mother for a moment before turning back to her sandcastle in a determined attempt to ignore the request.

Hecate smiled. She was definitely a Sister.

“Mei! Now!”

Mei’s sigh was so large that from the trees Hecate could see it shake her tiny body, but she stood up and started to gather her buckets and shovels. When she was finished, Mei walked over to her mother, who held out her hand, and the pair started to walk for home.

Their dwelling was only a block away, but Hecate could not risk being seen by the humans. Her body might be human, but the silver armor and the sharp pair of sai attached to her hips would attract attention.

Hecate stood up, balancing herself on the large branch which held her weight. She extended her hand, palm facing outwards, and whispered some words in Soljurian. A large, semi-clear hole appeared in front of her, and, though the hole swirled and wavered, Hecate could see Mei’s house through it. She stepped in without hesitation.

If a passerby had noticed Hecate’s appearance by Mei’s house, it would seem as if she had appeared out of nothing, and in some way she had. She arrived with enough time to quickly hide before mother and daughter arrived. She kept a good distance from the house so it would be more difficult to see her but close enough to have a good view inside.

Hecate sat there for hours, well past dark and the child’s bedtime. Normally, she would have gone home long ago, but something forced her to stay. She kept telling herself “*Only a little longer, only a little longer.*”

Once the family had gone to bed, Hecate relaxed her position, feeling free to walk around the yard, examining the place and its surroundings. The moon was extraordinarily bright that night and Hecate could see perfectly. It was a large home, the kind people bought when they planned on having a sizable family, well-maintained with large windows and a porch overlooking the kempt garden in the backyard. She felt calm as she settled between the large oak tree and the lilies next to the quiet house.

Then, she did not. Hecate sat straight up, a panic swirling in her stomach. She did not know what it was or where it had come from, but she had to get to the child. Onya help her, she had to get to Mei.

Having examined the house several times for many hours, Hecate knew her path already. She climbed the tree and, after steadying herself, tumbled silently onto the roof. She moved swiftly past the parents' windows which came first. The child's window was open, her parents feeling safe to do so since she was on the second floor, and Hecate cut the screen easily with her sai, ripping it open and slipping into Mei's room.

Mei did not wake, though Hecate could see her shaking. Hecate felt her forehead and dread filled her. The child's hands were clammy and her face hot. She was burning up like a child in the late stages of the Disease, but that was not possible. Yes, she was five years old, but Hecate had been watching her all day and the child had not even sniffled; yet here she was, hot as fire. A foul smell met Hecate's nose and she realized Mei had thrown up on the floor though she was now nearly unconscious.

She was dying. Hecate had no doubt that the child, now groaning quietly in her sleep, had very little time left.

Hecate shushed her gently. "I am so sorry, Mei. I have failed you, but I swear by Onya

that you will not die tonight.”

She had to get Mei to the Sisterhood; her only chance of survival was being with her Sisters.

Hecate picked up the child, still small enough to be carried, and pulled her close. Mei unconsciously snuggled up to Hecate and put her arms around her neck. Keeping a good grip on the child, Hecate once again held up her hand and whispered.

The hole appeared again, only this time Hecate could see the temple, home, in it, and she hurried through.

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Kali screamed with joy as she ran into the main room. “It’s today, Ma! Today! Today! Today!” The girl jumped in excited circles.

Durga smiled at her small daughter, who seemed unable to calm herself. “Today? What is today? Is today special?” Durga teased her.

Kali glared at her mother. “Maaaaa! It’s Training Day!”

“Oh, is it? Oh, my Onya, that is an important day. You must be excited.”

“So excited!” Kali screamed.

Durga laughed. “Come, love. A Sister-in-Training must have a good breakfast.”

Kali sat at the table and watched as her mother finished preparing the food. Durga trained older Sisters, so she was decked in gold armor that covered her torso, shoulders, and lower body. In traditional Sister style, it fitted her body and her arms; legs and neck were left exposed, allowing Sisters full movement. Some Sisters even left their stomachs unprotected, but this was dangerous and they had to learn how to fight in a certain fashion.

Kali did not have armor yet and she would not get any until she was thirteen. For now,

she wore a long silver skirt and silver sleeveless top, except that starting training meant she would get a short gold skirt and gold shorts, which gave her a larger range of motion and made it easier for her to learn how to fight. Someday, Kali knew, she would get beautiful armor just like her mother's.

There was a soft knock on the door, and, at Durga's bidding, an older woman entered. She was dark with long, straight black hair pulled up into a bun, and kind, brown eyes. A higher status than most Sisters and beyond fighting except in defense of the temple, she had left the armor behind in favor of gold and silver robes.

"Mother Isis." Durga immediately dropped into a Soljurian bow, one knee on the ground with one sai pointing to the ground and one sai held across her lap, her head bowed deeply.

Following her mother's example, Kali bent into a similar bow without the sai, and nearly fell over. Isis smiled. Such sloppiness was allowed in five-year-olds for a time.

"Rise, my Daughters," she said.

Isis took a moment to examine the pair. Kali looked quite like her Indian mother, despite her white father, with dark skin and deep brown eyes. She was strong, that was certain, and Isis had no doubt she would someday surpass her mother in skill.

"Would you like something, Mother?" Durga asked.

"Not today, I'm afraid. I must move on soon, but it was my understanding that Kali starts her training today." Isis smiled at the child who was shaking with excitement.

"Yes!" Kali burst out.

Durga glared at her daughter, who caught the hint.

"I mean, um, yes, Mother."

"Well, good, because I have something for you. Please sit."



Kali's eyes widened and she did as she was told, taking her normal place at the kitchen table, and Durga sat next to her.

Out of the folds of her robes Isis pulled a long wooden box and placed it in front of Kali, who was holding her breath in anticipation. She knew what was in that box. Every Sister-in-Training got them on her first day.

Isis opened the box and revealed a small pair of sai, short and blunted, but beautiful, crafted by someone of much skill, with Kali in mind. Like all training sai, the shaft and prongs were silver, and the handle was dark leather.

Kali was almost afraid to touch them, but she reached out and picked them up reverently. They were heavier than she had expected, but she knew she would get used to the weight. Someday, they would simply be an extension of her body.

Sai was the main weapon of the Sisterhood, though some specialized in archery or fought with a katana, but even they had to learn how to use the sai.

Isis pulled a belt that would hold Kali's sai out of the box as well and beckoned her forward. After Isis secured the belt, Kali dropped her sai into the slots left for them. She felt the weight at her hips and she tried to walk, but it felt awkward.

"Don't worry, love. It will get easier," Durga said. "Someday you won't notice them."

Kali smiled at her mother and followed Isis out of her home, off to the training room for Little Sisters.

Durga sighed as she watched Kali leave. Kali was too young to understand yet. All she knew of Sisters was power. Sisters were simply strong women who wielded powerful weapons and wore tough armor. She did not yet understand that Sisters were warriors, capable of bloodshed. Someday, she would know.

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